A Sociological Investigation of Trust
in
Complementary and Alternative Medicine Use

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Statement of Originality

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 968.

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Dated 21/09/2022
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Abstract

Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) comprises of a number of clinically and theoretically distinct therapies and practices, many becoming increasingly incorporated into the health care regimens of Australians. The lack of trust in biomedical practices is seemingly contradicted by evidence including from my study, that CAM and biomedical treatments are used concurrently. Despite real concerns over health risk form the adverse effects of pharmaceutical medications the CAM users interviewed for this study, with one exception, have continued using biomedical treatments. Interestingly, the CAM users in my study also express uncertainty in the practices of CAM and establish boundaries over what is acceptable and unacceptable use. For these users, there are clearly tensions between CAM and biomedicine and the interest is how they work with this tension in their everyday lives. To explore this tension, the theoretical underpinnings of the study draw on the sociology of trust.

The research method of constructivist grounded theory is used to produce an interpretative social constructionist account of trust in CAM use. The analysis is based on the accounts of 16 regular CAM users, selected on the basis of being frequent, intensive users of CAM. The interest in this thesis is in exploring the accounts of these users to establish the basis for trust in CAM treatment decision-making. Being self-reliant in their information seeking, desiring a level of self-control and experimental in their use of health treatments the CAM users exemplify Gidden's concept of a self-reflexive consumer. Utilising the sociological trust theories of Giddens and Luhmann trust is understood to be formed in both interpersonal and institutional contexts. To this end, the central argument of the thesis is that trust is mediated between CAM and biomedical approaches. The thesis argues further that trust is developed through a leap of faith in the practice of CAM, and this represents having faith in the derivative benefits of CAM treatment, rather than faith in CAM as a curative. Trust also arises from interpersonal experiences of health and illness, and from the meanings given to CAM practices. For some the meanings relate to CAM as pleasure and relaxation and as a spiritually embodied experience while for others, in the face of biomedical health risks CAM represents a safety valve. Further, I argue that trust develops according to the context of CAM use; that is, when CAM is used for achieving health outcomes, then trust is mediated between CAM and biomedical approaches, which are used pragmatically, in an ad hoc manner. When CAM is used to experience derivative benefits such as relaxation and feeling good, then trust is based in the construct of faith, and relates to CAM much more in terms of a leisured experience.